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ABSTRACT

To be successful, a vocabulary improvement program should teach vocabulary directly but in a meaningful context, involve teachers and use vocabulary from all content areas, and represent a long term commitment. Strategies promoting an effective program include the following: (1) teaching word consciousness, (2) using materials at students' instructional levels to help develop reading vocabulary, (3) presenting contextual analysis as a tool in reading comprehension, (4) studying word etymology, (5) teaching structural analysis, (6) using synonyms and antonyms to help students learn word meaning through association, (7) increasing students' awareness of words with multiple meanings, (8) building awareness of symbols, abbreviations, and acronyms to help increase comprehension, (9) pointing out the use and misuse of figurative language, (10) using structured overviews of text chapters to help clarify the relationships among words and concepts, (11) encouraging students to find new words in print, and (12) providing specific instruction in the use of specialized vocabulary. School-wide commitment to vocabulary development allows students to make lasting gains in receptive, productive, technical, and nontechnical vocabularies. (MM)

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Vocabulary Improvement:

Program Goals and Exemplary Techniques

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"Oh, Professor, what an incredulous speech. I enjoyed it anonymously. When will it be published?"
Professor, bemused. "Posthumously."
"Oh good. The sooner the better."

Now here is a person who might profit from a good vocabulary improvement program. What would be a good vocabulary program? What would be its guiding principles? What techniques would it employ?

The concern for growth of students' vocabularies is probably as old as schooling itself. The newspaper and magazine articles bemoaning the inefficient or insufficient word power of today's students are only the current manifestation of that concern. And yet the teacher or school setting out to work on the problem might be hard put to come up with a good, thorough program. There is a great deal of information on the topic, but there is little information suggesting basic techniques and basic understandings.

In the example above, the person responding to the professor's speech has betrayed deficits in his/her productive and receptive vocabularies. That is, s/he has produced inappropriate words (incredulous, anonymously) and misunderstood or misreceived another (posthumously). For people to really "own" a word, they must be able to both use it themselves (productive vocabulary, that is, written or spoken) and understand it when it is used by others (receptive, that is, heard or read). Some basic understandings about vocabulary growth and some exemplary techniques for vocabulary improvement instruction follow.

Basic Understanding

The statements below are intended as the foundation, the general guiding principles of a worthwhile vocabulary improvement program. They are:

1. Vocabulary improvement attempts are most successful when vocabulary is directly, rather than incidentally, taught.

2. Vocabulary improvement, to be successful, requires a long-term commitment.
3. Vocabulary improvement is not the sole responsibility of the English teacher or reading teacher. All teachers should be involved.
4. Vocabulary improvement is best accomplished when words are taught in meaningful contexts. (See #3 and #5)
5. Vocabulary improvement should include technical words unique to a given content area and more generally-used words that are used in subject-specific ways. The words are best introduced in the affected content area. In the case of the non-technical words, reinforcement, review, and broadening of the definition could be done in other classes.

Strategies that produce results

The following strategies gathered from current journal articles and our own experiences seem to offer the best foundation for a concerted vocabulary improvement program. They are offered as examples of the kinds of things one can do. There must certainly be endless variations and adaptations possible.

A. Attempt to develop word consciousness. The development of word consciousness leads to an understanding of precise language as an effective tool of communication. This, in turn, encourages careful use of vocabulary.

To choose words precisely, one must appreciate their expressiveness and power of nuance; it requires a consciousness of words and language. Indeed, VanderMeulen (1972) suggests that students at every level need to realize that vocabulary represents the "fundamental tool of effective communication" (p. 148). He sees the development of this realization as a goal for all teachers.

B. Use materials at the pupils' instructional levels to help develop reading vocabulary.

Culyer (1978) recommends the use of materials at the instructional level for optimal vocabulary development. Material beyond this level offers complications that interfere with comprehension, rendering them unsuitable for the task. Presumably, materials at the independent level do not contain enough unknown words for vocabulary growth to occur. However, it seems intuitively sensible to encourage reading at the independent level in order to reinforce and refine each student's vocabulary.

C. Ability to use contextual analysis leads to the comprehension of unknown words.

Contextual analysis is an essential tool in reading comprehension. According to Lee (1978), phonetic and structural analysis becomes less useful for determining meaning as new words become increasingly more specialized and less familiar. She points out, however, that this instruction frequently occurs only in developmental reading classes and not in content area classes, where it is most needed. Relying on transfer from one class to another is too risky for such an important skill. In this Culyer concurs, emphasizing that the teaching of contextual analysis must be specific.

In accordance with the research of Askov and Kamm (1976), Lee advocates teaching students the actual context-clue categories so that they become aware of the strategies authors employ to signal meaning. For early training in contextual analysis, Lee suggests using the maze technique.* This procedure would help develop awareness of language cues while developing receptive vocabulary. She also suggests using cloze procedure* with words deleted from various context-clue constructions. The ability

*For detailed descriptions of the maze technique and cloze procedure, see Stauffer, Abrams, and Pikulski, pp. 154-160.

to fill in an appropriate word would indicate the ability to use context effectively and would help develop productive vocabulary skills.

D. Study the historical origin and changes in word meaning to develop more accurate apperception of words and a greater understanding of the concepts the words represent.

The study of word origins and changes in meaning can be fascinating. Warner (1978) advocates teaching words with interesting etymologies because the stories will capture imagination and motivate interest in language as well as in vocabulary. He suggests that teachers learn to tell the stories from which the words are derived as part of their vocabulary units. By studying the origin, students will begin to understand that word meanings are not static but that they constantly change "in meaning and nuance" (p. 591). This realization attunes them to a broadening receptive vocabulary. When students use the newly-acquired words appropriately in writing and speaking, their productive vocabularies increase as well.

E. Teach structural analysis. The study of structural analysis leads to the discovery of meaning and to the ability to form many words out of the same word parts.

Warner suggests that students, after learning a new word by hearing of its historical origin, try to think of as many words as possible that share with it a structural element. An important aspect of this is the students' identification of the shared context of the words. (eg.: a campaign is fought on a field, while a campus is a field where a college is located, p. 592).

Voigt (1978) lists some common Greek and Latin roots, suffixes, and prefixes that one might use in a vocabulary program although she does not identify them according to their language of origin. She mentions appro-

priate activities, including matching words with their definitions, making up words from a list of Greek and Latin elements, arriving at the meaning of new words by examining each element, and figuring out what words with the same root have in common.

Both Voigt and Culyer recommend structural analysis only for those students of average reading achievement or better. The command of a body of useful elements increases both receptive and productive vocabularies. One can identify new words while reading or listening and use appropriately precise words while writing and speaking.

F. Identify clusters of synonyms and antonyms to help students learn many forms through association.

The knowledge of synonyms and antonyms can expand both receptive and productive vocabularies. Culyer suggests grouping words that are semantically related to help young students recognize the similarity in meanings. As students gain in maturity, they should be helped to distinguish the varying connotations of similar words (eg. stout, fat, obese, heavy). For learning antonyms, teachers should begin with words the children already know and then progress to new words. Structural analysis is an aspect of this activity when prefixes are used to produce antonyms.

Warner finds that listing many synonyms and antonyms and using them in a short writing assignment develops writing skills as well as vocabulary skills. He thinks this will help students realize that although many words might fit into the same context, one will have the most exact meaning.

Balasa (1974) indicates that beginning with common and frequently-used words, one can elicit synonyms that will be less frequent and common. This activity may help develop an awareness and understanding of abstract meanings.

G. Try to increase students' awareness of words with multiple meanings. Awareness of the multiple meanings of words leads to greater comprehension.

Culyer reports that work is needed in this area because when one knows a word in a particular context, a mind set may be developed for that familiar meaning. We believe that tendency has definite implications for content-area instruction. Non-technical vocabulary may take on specialized meanings in different areas. Examples of this phenomenon are such words as set, climate, act, power, and bill, all of which are words carrying very specific meanings depending on the context in which they appear. Facilitating students' abilities to understand and use words in their myriad meanings develops both productive and receptive vocabularies.

H. Try to build awareness of symbols, abbreviations, and acronyms to help increase comprehension.

Symbols, abbreviations, and acronyms have become integral components of language in many areas, including mathematics and politics. Mastery of these forms, therefore, is important for one to understand or communicate about a subject. Culyer suggests that students be taught an awareness of them as a form of vocabulary. This view conveys the appropriateness of their study in a vocabulary program.

I. Attempt to make students aware of the use and misuse of figurative language. Building awareness of figurative language helps increase comprehension.

Because basal texts use figurative language during the late primary and early intermediate grades, Culyer recommends early attention to figurative language. Such devices as idioms, metaphors, and personification may be crucial to the comprehension of a reading selection.

To truly understand such devices, however, students may also need to use them in their own speech and writing. Such encouragement may lead to

greater appreciation for the variety of language while at the same time, encouraging the students own expressiveness.

J. Use structured overviews of text chapters to help to clarify the relationships among words and concepts.

Pachtman and Riley (1978) advocate teacher use of structured overviews, diagrams that graphically depict the relationships among terms and concepts. They further suggest that students working in groups can produce their own structured overviews to demonstrate their proficiency in determining the the relationships. While Pachtman and Riley's article dealt specifically with vocabulary development in mathematics, the suggestions are quite applicable to other content areas as well.

K. Provide or encourage opportunities for students to see new words frequently in print in order to gain greater mastery.

Learning new vocabulary in a vacuum is not conducive to mastery. If students see new words in a variety of contexts, they will see greater need for learning them. Locating them in the newspaper, magazines, novels, and content-area texts also helps to reinforce the learning of new words. Both teachers and students can engage in active searches for vocabulary words.

Similarly, the student who does not use the new words will not develop proficiency. Culyer recommends encouraging students to use them, while recognizing those who do use them. The more often a new word is used, the more likely it is to become a permanent part of the student's vocabulary.

L. Provide specific instruction in the use of specialized vocabulary. Specialized vocabularies require specific instruction if students are to understand what they read.

The use of specialized vocabulary is often condemned as the use of

mere jargon. But the fact is that specialized vocabularies evolve out of the need for people within a field to have precise understandings of the field and its concerns. Special or technical vocabularies call for special skills, skills which are best taught within the content area where they are to be used. Dunlap and McKnight (1978) make a case, for example, for the instruction of vocabulary unique to math problems. They suggest that accurate reading of math problems depends upon "The three level translation of vocabulary [which] includes the general, technical, and symbolic vocabularies. Children must understand [in our terms, receptive] the components of each vocabulary, be able to translate from one vocabulary to the other, and think [in our terms, productive] in each vocabulary." (p. 183)

Again, as stated in guideline #5, the technical vocabulary and the special use of general vocabulary are probably best taught within the affected content area.

In an era when teachers are encouraged to simplify the readability of materials for student use, vocabulary stands apart rather conspicuously. In a content area, vocabulary can be simplified and changed only so much before one is no longer communicating intelligibly with others about it. (See Nelson, 1978) To participate to any degree in a content field, one must be able to use and understand the technical and non-technical language associated with it. For this reason, we advocate a school-wide commitment to vocabulary development so that students can make gains in receptive and productive, technical and non-technical vocabularies, gains that are real, useful, and lasting.

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